

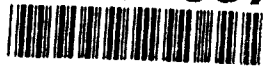
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ORGANIZATIONAL RESPONSES TO DEATH  
IN THE MILITARY

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*When a friend or loved one dies, the challenge for survivors is to somehow cope effectively with the loss and go on living and functioning. This is true not only for family members, but also for friends and coworkers of the deceased. How organizations respond to a death can influence coping in either a positive or negative direction. Military organizations have long experience with death, and have developed programs and policies aimed at assisting survivors to adjust positively to loss. This report reviews how casualty policies have developed in the U.S. Army, and draws on the Army's casualty experience to suggest some ways in which organizational responses to death might facilitate healthy adjustment for survivors.*

The sudden, unexpected death of family members, relatives, and close friends can be disturbing in a way unmatched by other stressful life events. Death confronts the survivors with a variety of issues and challenges for which they are often unprepared. In addition to the grief associated with loss of a loved one, death can generate persistent thoughts and concerns about one's own mortality. Within organizations, the adaptive challenge for individuals is compounded when death creates vacancies in key po-

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sitions or roles. Such "role vacuums" often require major readjustments for the survivors, while duties are reallocated and/or replacements sought. A critical (though infrequently contemplated) question for managers, counselors, educators, and policy makers concerns how survivors cope with the challenges presented by the death of a coworker, and what organizations might do to encourage healthy adjustment. This article examines programs and policies related to casualties and death in the military and attempts to extract useful lessons of wider applicability. Drawing on military casualty experience and relevant research, we suggest some ways in which individual and group recovery might be facilitated by organizational responses to death.

Military organizations regularly must address issues related to death, during peacetime as well as war. A recent study shows that despite generally lower mortality rates in the peacetime U.S. Army than in comparable U.S. civilian groups, still significant numbers of service members are killed each year in training accidents, as well as by other external causes (Rothberg, Bartone, Holloway, & Marlowe, 1990). The military must also be prepared to respond to death on a large scale in the event of hostilities or disasters, and to do so in a context that places a premium on rapid recovery of individual and group functioning (Bartone & Wright, 1990). For these reasons, and also out of humane concern for grieving family members, many military organizations have established comprehensive programs to foster effective and sensitive handling of death-related matters. These programs are typically managed by a special "casualty branch," which develops, coordinates, and implements policies and procedures on issues related to casualties. Casualty affairs include such things as the notification of family members, recovery and transport of human remains, respectful and appropriate disposition of personal effects, helping families plan funeral arrangements and memorial services, and facilitating claims for insurance and other benefits.

Military casualty activities also serve important social and psychological functions. Policies and practices related to casualty processing are likely to impact on (a) individual mental health—how persons exposed to death cope with their reactions of grief, horror, loss and fear; (b) unit morale—how quickly and fully the military unit recovers its capacity to function effectively; and (c) the broader world of civil-military relations (Bartone, Ursano,

Wright, & Ingraham, 1989; Wright, 1987; Ender, 1991). For example, Army officers who assisted bereaved family members after the Army's Gander, Newfoundland air disaster (a charter airline crash that killed 248 soldiers returning from peacekeeping duty in 1985) had a positive impact on many family members. As official representatives of the organization, these assistance officers came to personify a responsive and caring military for many grieving families (Bartone, 1987).

The military casualty affairs office or branch is the agency responsible for planning and implementing institutional responses to death. As such, it is in a unique position to influence the course of adjustment or adaptation to loss. Through their programs and policies, such agencies can facilitate healthy psychological recovery following trauma by establishing a context in which normal, positive adjustment processes can occur. Formal organizational responses to death shape the environment within which individuals and groups respond to death, or what might be termed the "organizational recovery context." It is now understood that situational or environmental factors are important determinants of the coping processes people use to manage stress in their lives (McCrae, 1984; Lazarus, DeLongis, Folkman & Gruen, 1985). While all organizations can influence both physical and psychological aspects of the work environment, this is even more true for highly structured organizations like the military (Moos, 1975; Bartone, 1988; Bartone & Kirkland, 1991). In fact, a recent study found that the "recovery context" established by leaders of military units experiencing fatal training accidents appears to influence individual and unit adjustment to loss, in either a positive or negative direction (Tyler & Gifford, 1991).

In what follows, we briefly discuss the nature of death in the military, not only in war but also during peacetime. Next, we give a short historical overview of casualty operations and services in the U.S. Army. Finally, we consider how casualty programs and policies may speed healthy recovery for both individuals and organizations.

### **Death in the Military**

Death in the military occurs in times of peace as well as war. A peacetime military must train for war if it is to be effective, and

such training is inherently dangerous. For example, in one typical recent year there were 483 accidental deaths in the Army alone (Washington Headquarters Service, 1988). Occasionally, large-scale disasters push this number even higher. For example in 1985, 248 Army soldiers died in the Gander air crash just before Christmas (Bartone et al., 1989).

Although the number of fatal training accidents has been decreasing since 1977 (Washington Headquarters Service, 1988), the risk of death and injury remains a prominent demand of the military occupation (M. W. Segal, 1989). In addition to the approximately 12,000 military retiree deaths each year, Department of Defense casualty centers process an average of 2,100 active duty deaths per year (based on 1979–1988 data; Washington Headquarters Service, 1988). Those who die while on active duty are generally quite young, with an average age of 26 for enlisted service members and 33 for officers (Department of Defense, 1988). Although the safety record of the U.S. Army is good, fatal accidents continue to occur as soldiers train with heavy, dangerous equipment. Terrorism poses another peacetime risk for soldiers. As military units are utilized more commonly in peacekeeping operations, soldiers can make convenient targets for terrorist attack (D. R. Segal, 1989). For example, 241 U.S. Marines died in 1983 when a terrorist truck-bomb crashed into their Beirut barracks. So even in the absence of combat, military organizations must be prepared to respond effectively to the sudden death of service members.

### **U.S. Army Casualty Operations: An Overview**

The story of U.S. Army casualty operations since World War II is one of continued growth and expansion of services to the families of dead, wounded, or seriously ill soldiers. In order to obtain an historical perspective on casualty services provided to families, we examined eleven editions of the Army's handbook for survivors published since 1950 (e.g., Department of Army, 1950; 1989), and identified the number of distinct services or entitlements listed in each. Results show that the number of services and benefits provided by the Army and other federal agencies ap-

proximately doubled from 22 in 1950 to 46 in 1989. The Appendix lists the current benefits available to survivors. While some of these are actually paid by government agencies other than the Army (e.g., Veterans Administration, Social Security Agency, Internal Revenue Service), the Army provides detailed information to survivors on benefits available, and extensive help in applying for them.

During World War II, the families of soldiers who died were informed by telegram from the Army Adjutant General. The telegram was directed to whoever the soldier had designated as the "emergency addressee" or person to notify in case of emergency. The message stated the basic facts of the death as known at the time, and offered a brief statement of regret. Not uncommonly, the telegram did not arrive until weeks after the death. Following the telegram, the Army sent the family a letter of condolence and a pamphlet outlining survivor benefits. It was the family member's responsibility to apply for most of these benefits (Department of the Army, 1950).

Shortly after the Korean War ended in 1956, the Army sought to improve the death notification process by providing a personal visit by an Army officer to the family's home to confirm the soldier's death. The initial notification of death still came by telegram, but this was followed by an officer who verified the death, and provided additional details to the family when possible. The personal visit was meant to convey a greater sense of organizational appreciation and respect for the sacrifice of the deceased soldier and his/her family.

During the Vietnam conflict, the Army made additional substantial changes to its casualty notification and assistance policies. In an effort to further humanize the process, the initial notification was now made in person by a "casualty notifier," with a confirming telegraph to follow. Financial benefits to family members were increased significantly. Written policy statements more clearly delineated the eligibility criteria for survivor benefits. While there was no stated requirement that the casualty notifier be from the same unit as the deceased soldier, it was recommended that notifying officers be of equal or higher rank to the deceased. Only officers or senior ranking non-commissioned officers were to make death notifications. Again, this was meant to

convey greater respect and appreciation for the deceased soldier, and to symbolize the importance vested by the Army in each soldier's life. In the interest of lessening the shock for family members, the new policy also stipulated that death notifications not be made after 10:00 p.m. or before 6:00 a.m. local time. The personal notification was still followed by a telegram confirming the details of the death.

Also during the Vietnam era, the Army initiated an expanded Casualty Assistance Program. Under this program, which persists in its basic form today, commissioned officers, warrant officers and senior ranking non-commissioned officers are placed on unit duty rosters for possible service as casualty notifiers or casualty assistance officers (CAOs). Before 1987, the casualty assistance officer was known as the survivor assistance officer. When a soldier dies, his unit contacts the Army's central casualty records office in Washington, DC. There, the soldier's emergency data card is checked to obtain the name and location of his/her next-of-kin. This information, as well as a factual statement on the death, is forwarded to the subordinate casualty office that is geographically closest to the home of the soldier's next-of-kin. This office assigns a casualty notifier and a casualty assistance officer, drawing names from local unit duty rosters. Experience has shown it is helpful to separate these roles, since many families seem to be more receptive to ongoing support when it comes from a person other than the one who made the initial notification of death. Many surviving family members report persistent negative images and associations to the casualty notifier (F. R. Lange, personal communication, April 26, 1989).

The casualty notifier has the task of first locating the next-of-kin, and then telling them of the soldier's death. This is done in a careful, formal manner. The following paragraph is recommended:

"The Secretary of the Army has asked me to express his deep regret that your (relationship) (died/was killed in action) in (country/State) on (date). (State the circumstances.) The Secretary extends his deepest sympathy to you and your family in your tragic loss." (Dept. of the Army PAM 608-33, 1987, p. 5)

The notifier informs the family member(s) that a telegram confirming the death will come within 24 hours, and that a cas-

ualty assistance officer will visit soon to provide assistance. Unless the family member requires immediate help, the notifier departs once the notification is complete. The notifier immediately informs the CAO that notification was made, and relays any information about the family that might help in providing support. Next the CAO contacts the family, usually by phone, and arranges a time to meet. By policy, this meeting should occur within 24 hours of the initial death notification. During their first visit the CAO provides the family with phone numbers for contacting him/her, and solicits the family's wishes for funeral arrangements and disposition of remains. These and other duties of the CAO are detailed in a Casualty Assistance Handbook that has undergone several revisions over the years (e.g., Department of the Army, 1971; 1987). The general guidance given to CAOs is "to help the family in any way possible." An important aspect of the job is to function as liaison between the family and the Army, facilitating the flow of information to the family and providing them with practical assistance on administrative matters.

The next major change in Army casualty policies occurred in 1970, when personalized notification of death was extended to "secondary next-of-kin" (SNOK), as well as primary. Although usually listing a parent as their SNOK, soldiers can name anyone they choose on their emergency data cards, including siblings, spouses or ex-spouses, grandparents or friends. The responsibilities of the CAO remained the same.

The Army's 1985 Gander crash provided the impetus for another series of changes in casualty assistance programs. Just before Christmas in 1985, a plane carrying 248 U.S. Army soldiers crashed at Gander, Newfoundland. The flight was returning soldiers from peacekeeping duty in the Sinai to their home post, Fort Campbell, Kentucky. Everyone aboard was killed. For the United States, it was the largest military mass casualty event since Vietnam. Useful lessons were learned in the aftermath of the crash, leading to greater elaboration and refinement of services for families of dead soldiers. Where earlier editions of the Army pamphlet for next-of-kin emphasize the survivors' own responsibility to pursue entitlements, the latest (twelfth) edition specifies the CAO's role in helping the family obtain even more extensive entitlements, from funeral expenses to movie theater, transpor-



tation, and recreation privileges (Department of the Army, 1989). Furthermore, services to the secondary next-of-kin are no longer limited to simple notification. Anyone designated by a service member as a SNOK is now entitled to a wide range of services, including regular briefings by the CAO, and government-funded travel to and from funerals and memorial services. As new experiences accumulate, the Army continues to improve its casualty programs and policies. For example, efforts are currently underway to apply computer-based technologies to the transmission of casualty data and messages, in order to provide family members with more accurate and timely information.

### **Discussion and Implications**

As an organization that must deal on a regular basis with death, the U.S. Army has developed a variety of programs and policies aimed at helping bereaved survivors. This article has outlined the Army's casualty procedures, and documents how casualty services have grown over the last 40 years. Although these services still focus mainly on providing administrative and financial assistance to families, Army casualty programs reflect an increased sensitivity to emotional and psychological issues surrounding death. The current policy of assigning a CAO to help a family for an extended period is indicative of the general trend to make casualty programs more personalized and supportive than they have been in the past.

An often unstated assumption that underlies many Army casualty assistance efforts is that the course of individual adjustment for a survivor may be influenced positively or negatively by how the organization responds to a death. If the organization seems cold and uncaring, the anger, grief, and frustration of family members is exacerbated, and the sense of meaninglessness regarding the death can be increased. On the other hand, if the organization responds with concern and dignity, a family's pain may be eased somewhat. It is largely this desire to reduce the family's grief, and facilitate healthy recovery that leads the Army on an organizational level to attend so carefully to the details of casualty operations, from how the initial notification is per-

formed, to arranging funeral and memorial services, and providing ongoing personal support and assistance to family members. These programs have developed largely without the benefit of research or theory to support their effectiveness. Instead, they are the result of long and hard experience with casualties, and the slow accumulation of wisdom regarding what is effective and what is not.

Recent research on coping with traumatic loss indeed supports the potential psychological value of many military casualty policies. For example, a variety of studies have shown that programs/activities that increase a sense of positive meaning regarding the trauma or loss can facilitate healthy psychological adjustment for survivors (e.g., Pennebaker, Colder, & Sharp, 1990). While many questions remain, there is a growing consensus among professionals that healthy adjustment to major loss involves a cognitive/emotional process of "working-through" the traumatic event, through which the loss is understood and integrated into one's total life experience (Horowitz, 1978; Ursano & Fullerton, 1990). This involves finding some acceptable explanation for the loss, and attributing meaning that is generally positive and coherent in nature (Frankl, 1959; Antonovsky, 1979; Dollinger, 1986). To the extent casualty assistance programs facilitate positive cognitive constructions of meaning for survivors, a healthy grief and coping process may be accelerated. Anecdotally at least, many family members appear to have less trouble adjusting to the death of a loved one when the loss is construed as serving a noble or "good cause," such as defending one's country or family, as opposed to a senseless event like a car accident or natural disaster. In Operation Desert Storm, for example, several Army deaths resulted from preventable motor vehicle accidents completely unrelated to combat. In more than one such case, surviving family members requested that the death be officially recorded as combat-related rather than non-combat-related. In research interviews, the CAOs working with these families reported that family members had a strong desire to believe the death was for a worthy cause (Bartone, Gifford, & Tyler, 1991). The vast majority of family members also choose to have a funeral with full military honors, including honor guard, 21-gun salute, and the flag-draped coffin. For many, this seems to

enhance the sense that the death was in the service of some noble, higher purpose.

U.S. Army casualty assistance programs are aimed almost exclusively at bereaved family members. But some of the wisdom accumulated in casualty operations might be usefully applied to other groups affected by death, such as surviving members of the military unit. Whether unit losses are the result of combat, training accidents, or some other cause, the survivors can be profoundly affected (Bartone & Wright, 1990; Gifford & Tyler, 1989). Recognizing this, a potential pitfall for agencies that must respond somehow to death within their ranks is that they will fail to provide an organizational context that encourages and supports healthy acceptance and integration of loss. Worse yet, organizational policies might actually interfere with healthy coping processes. Ideally, organizations will provide programs, policies, and practices that assist individuals and groups to transform loss, suffering, and death into a psychological asset instead of a liability, a source of strength and commitment rather than of prolonged mental distress. Tyler & Gifford (1991) observed several ways in which this may occur in military units following fatal training accidents. For example, surviving soldiers apparently adjust more effectively to the accidental death of comrades when leaders take time to eulogize the deceased, and relate the loss in positive terms to the pursuit of broader mission goals.

Casualty workers themselves, such as casualty notifiers and casualty assistance officers, may be deeply affected by their experiences, and can benefit from supportive organizational policies. Several studies have documented the special stressors and related ill effects that casualty workers often experience (Bartone et al., 1989, 1992). While these duties must be performed with the highest professionalism, most of those assigned receive no special training. They are typically thrust into the role with only several hours notice, do it as a duty in addition to their regular jobs, and are encouraged to complete the process promptly (Department of the Army, 1987). Following submission of the CAOs' final report (anywhere from 1 week to 1 year after the death), there is no further organizationally sanctioned contact between the bereaved family and the Army.

While no amount of preparation is likely to remove the stress from casualty work, some kind of advance training or preparation should help casualty workers to cope more effectively with the special demands of the job. Rosenbaum & Ballard (1990) recently described an effective training program for Air Force officers who specialize in casualty affairs. In the Army, the need to train casualty personnel is complicated by the fact that most Army casualty workers are not specialists, but perform casualty assistance as extra duty. Although families of the deceased have been well-served by this system, Army casualty workers themselves can pay a heavy psychological price (Bartone et al., 1989; Bartone & Fullerton, 1992). Large organizations such as the Army that confront death with some regularity might benefit by adopting the Air Force strategy of training personnel to specialize in casualty affairs.

It is an unpleasant fact that military organizations have extensive experience with death, and with trying to assist survivors in various ways. But useful lessons with application beyond the military can be taken from military casualty operations. This brief review of casualty programs in the U.S. Army shows that on an organizational level many programs and policies aim to encourage healthy coping of survivors after the death of a soldier. While the Army's casualty support programs are still being improved, they do represent an unusually high level of organizational commitment to assist those affected by death, and may thus provide a policy template for other organizations that want to assist survivors following a "death within the ranks."

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**Appendix Army/Government Benefits & Entitlements for Survivors of Deceased Army Members, as Described in Department of Army Pamphlet No. 608-4 (1989 Edition).**

1. General Report of Death: All available facts are provided to family during personal visit by casualty notifier
2. Report of Casualty: 10 certified copies of "certificate of death" provided to next-of-kin
3. Reports of Investigation: autopsy & death investigation reports provided to family on request
4. Care of remains by military: includes embalming, metal casket, clothing, burial, transport, & other expenses
5. Private arrangements for shipment of remains: Army will reimburse for transportation arranged by family
6. Private arrangements for preparation of remains: Army pays if family prefers private arrangements
7. Care of remains if death occurs overseas—Army pays for preparation & transport
8. Burial in Arlington National Cemetery authorized (if space available)
9. Burial in other national cemeteries is authorized (if space available)
10. Headstone or marker supplied
11. Full military honors provided at funeral
12. Army funds travel of dependents to/from funeral
13. Army funds movement of household goods
14. Army funds movement of a mobile home
15. Army funds the shipment of an automobile
16. Family can remain in government housing for 90 days & more
17. Personal effects are collected, safeguarded, & returned to family
18. Army Emergency Relief provides financial support as needed
19. American Red Cross provides emergency financial assistance
20. "Death Gratuity" payment of \$6,000 made within 72 hours
21. Family receives any pay or allowances due the soldier
22. Soldier contributions to Veterans Education Assistance Program are returned to family
23. Social security lump-sum death payment to surviving spouse

24. Eligible family members receive social security benefits
25. Dependency & Indemnity Compensation paid to family through the Veterans Administration
26. Survivor Benefit Plan provides annuity to spouse if soldier was retirement eligible
27. Reinstated Entitlement Program for Survivors, extends some Social Security benefits for spouses & children
28. Servicemen's Group Life Insurance, now pays up to \$200,000 to survivors if soldier was enrolled
29. Home mortgages insured by FHA are paid by Army for 2 years beyond date of death
30. Continued medical care provided to spouse (if unmarried) & children under age 21
31. Commissary privileges for unremarried spouse
32. Unremarried spouse & dependent children may continue to shop at post exchange
33. Unremarried spouse & dependent children may continue to use post movie theaters & recreational facilities
34. Unremarried spouse & dependent children are entitled to government identification card
35. Unremarried spouse receives preference for civil service jobs
36. Federal income taxes of deceased cancelled for year in which death occurred (under some circumstances)
37. Federal estate taxes are reduced if death was combat related
38. Army will pay claims for loss or destruction of personal property (e.g., household goods, personal effects)
39. Posthumous promotions are made under some circumstances
40. Posthumous awards/medals are granted on commander's approval, & presented to family
41. Unremarried spouses are entitled to V.A. secured home loans
42. V.A. Dependents' Education Assistance program provides educational benefits to spouses & children
43. Army Emergency Relief program gives college loans & grants to spouses & children of deceased soldiers
44. Dependent children may attend Dept. of Defense Overseas Dependents Schools (if space available)
45. Free legal advice & assistance from Army lawyers is available to family members
46. Government benefits & life insurance proceeds are generally exempt from attachment by creditors